

Qualified Early Childhood Teachers Reduce the Achievement Gap

Overview

Consistent standards for teacher qualifications do not exist across early care and education programs in Iowa. Some settings require no more formal training than a high school education and 10 hours of training in areas such as child development, health, and safety, while others require licensed teachers with a degree in early childhood education and ongoing professional development. Numerous studies have found that the education levels of preschool teachers and specialized training in early childhood education predict teaching quality and positively effect children's achievement of social, emotional, language, literacy and cognitive skills (Barnett, 2003).

Children entering kindergarten in Iowa do not have the language and literacy skills necessary to be successful in school (Department of Education, 2005).² Research indicates that half of the achievement gap upon high school graduations was present at kindergarten entry. It is important to recognize that qualified early childhood teachers with specialized expertise and training are just as essential in preschool as qualified elementary and secondary teachers are in K-12.

Link between Early Childhood Teacher Qualifications and Children's Achievement

A large body of research shows teacher education is related to high quality preschool programs that lead to increases in school success, higher test scores, fewer school dropouts, higher graduation rates, less special education and even lower crime rates. Therefore, a critical element in providing quality preschool services is that teachers have received the educational preparation in early childhood education to enhance children's learning and development.

Research has linked the long-term educational, social, and economic benefits for children to teachers who are professionally qualified and adequately compensated (Barnett, Lamy, and Jung, 2005).³

The study of high quality state funded preschool programs indicates:

- The most effective preschool teachers are those with at least a four-year college degree and specialized training in early childhood education.
- Teachers with these qualifications have more responsive interactions with children, provide richer language and cognitive experiences and are less authoritarian.
- High quality preschool education depends on effective, high-quality teachers.

1 2/6/07

¹ Barnett, W.S. 2003. Better Teachers, Better Preschools: Student Achievement Linked to Teacher Qualifications, Preschool Policy Matter, 2. New Brunswick, NJ: NIEER.

² Iowa Department of Education, 2005 – 2006. Kindergarten literacy assessment data.

³ Barnett, W.S., Lamy, C., and Jung, K. 2005. The Effects of State Prekindergarten Programs on Young Children's School Readiness in Five States. New Brunswick, NJ: NIEER.

Children's achievements include:

- Gains in vocabulary scores that were about 31% greater than gains of children without the quality program;
- Gains in math skills by 44% compared to children's growth without the quality program;
- Increased print awareness (85%) among children participating in the high quality program compared to children without the program.

Early Childhood Teachers' Expertise

A better understanding of children's capabilities for learning at a very young age supports the need for preschool programs to have early childhood teachers with specialized expertise in early childhood education. The benefits of investing in programs that meet quality standards for children and society are well documented through rigorous research studies.

The National Research Council (2001)⁴ recommended that a four-year-degree, with specialized training in early childhood education, be the minimum standard for early childhood teachers serving preschool children.

Early Childhood Teachers' knowledge and skills include the following competencies:

- Understanding of how children learn and what children need to know and be able to do based on child development and early learning standards:
- Individualizing teaching based on temperament, responsiveness, learning styles, ability, home language, culture and other characteristics of each child;
- Establishing effective relationships with young children and their families;
- Working effectively with groups of young children.

Professional Development System

While it is an essential component of quality preschool programs to have licensed early childhood teachers, there are additional research-based indicators of quality programs that include implementation of nationally recognized program standards, comprehensive curricula, systematic child assessments, and ongoing professional development.

The Iowa Department of Education, in collaboration with the Office of Empowerment, is developing strategies to implement a statewide early care, health and education professional development system. A professional development system will provide in-service and pre-service opportunities to support the implementation of research-based early care, health and education practices. These strategies will encourage early childhood providers to take course work that may lead to a four-year-degree with specialized training in early childhood education.

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⁴ Bowman, B., Donovan, M.S., and Burns, M.S. 2001. Eager to Learn. National Research Council. Washington, DC.